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AUTHOR Tse, Lucy
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ABSTRACT

A study explored the process of ethnic identity formation and the role of language in the ethnic identity of five language-minority adults, and any changes in language's role over time. In-depth interviews were conducted with five U.S.-born ethnic and language minority adults with diverse backgrounds. Brief profiles of the three men and two women are presented. The recorded interviews and interview notes were analyzed for orientations toward culture, orientations toward language, and group membership, and for changes over time. Results suggested two stages of ethnic identity development: (1) lack of awareness and/or interest in ethnic language, culture, or group membership, and (2) a period of ethnic identity exploration and experimentation. Characteristic behaviors and attitudes of each stage are outlined, with examples from the interviews. The respondents' orientations toward the ethnic language appeared to parallel the changes occurring in orientations toward ethnic culture and group membership, and it is suggested that language plays a prominent role in identity formation. Respondents described their own movement from one stage to the next. No evidence was found in this group for a third stage, proposed in the literature, or conflict resolution and identity achievement. Contains 16 references. (MSE)

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The Effects of Ethnic Identity Formation on Attitudes Toward Ethnic Language Development

Lucy Tse

University of Southern California

School of Education

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the

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Running Head: ETHNIC IDENTITY

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The Effects of Ethnic Identity Formation on Attitudes Toward Ethnic Language Development

Ethnic identity is a concept that has been examined in a number of fields including sociology, psychology, and education, and has been conceptualized quite differently by researchers in each of those fields. Several studies view ethnic identity as a static psychological state that can be correlated or used to predict factors such as psychological distress, academic achievement, and self esteem, among others (see e.g. Gilbert, 1987; Ortiz & Arce, 1984; Caetano, 1987). In fact, many researchers define ethnic identity itself as one or more of the following factors, some of which are static by definition, while others are treated as fixed features: generational status, language proficiency and usage, attitudes toward ethnic and dominant languages and cultures, knowledge of ethnic cultural beliefs and practices, and participation in cultural activities and organizations (Buriel, Calzada, & Vasquez, 1982; Neff, 1986; Burnam, Telles, Karno, Hough, & Escobar, 1987).

Another strand of research, however, takes a dynamic perspective of ethnic identity and is based in part on Erickson's (1968) ego identity formation theory and Marcia's (1966, 1980) adaptation. Erickson asserts that identity formation is a process rather than a static entity and that this process is influenced by the interaction between psychological (internal) and social (external) factors. Further, Erickson proposes that identity formation follows a sequence of steps, from "introjection," through "identification," to "identity formation." Introjection is the incorporation of another's image (such as our mother's) and occurs in

infancy, while identification takes place in childhood and depends on the child's interaction with trustworthy people in various social roles. Identity formation is a result of a process of selective assimilations of childhood identifications and their incorporation in a new configuration.

Marcia (1966, 1980) adopted Erickson's conceptual framework to describe the formation of ethnic identity in minority individuals. He provides descriptions of the stages of ethnic identity formation and suggests, as Erickson did, that identity is achieved after a period of reflection and experimentation, primarily during adolescence. Marcia described four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Diffusion describes someone who has not explored or committed to an identity and whose values and beliefs are derived from others, such as family or society. Foreclosure refers to a high level of commitment with little or no exploration. Moratorium is intense exploration working toward commitment. Identity achievement is commitment reached after a period of exploration.

Several developmental models of ethnic identity reflecting Erickson's and Marcia's work have emerged. Phinney (1989) proposed a three stage model that begins with an unexamined ethnic identity, moves through a period of exploration, and ends in an achieved ethnic identity. Atkinson, Morten, and Sue's (1989) five-stage model is also similar in that it is developmental, though the authors suggest that the ethnic identity formation process is not necessarily linear and individuals may not experience all stages in their lifetime. Both Cross (1978) and Kim (1981) presented four-stage models resulting from their research on identity

formation in African-Americans and Asian-Americans, respectively. All of these models are similar in that they follow the same general developmental process that begins with an unexamined identity and a period of unawareness or ambivalence, passing through a period of introspection, experimentation, and exploration, and concluding with a period of conflict resolution and decision making.

The little empirical research on developmental models of ethnic identity formation has been in the form of verification that stages of development exist. Phinney and Tarver (1988) found using open-ended interviews in a study of 8th and 10th grade Black and White students that fewer 10th graders showed evidence of ethnic identity search, which the authors suggest is evidence that the older students had completed more searching. Krate, Leventhal, and Silverstein's (1974) adult African-American subjects recounted how their self-perceptions shifted from lower to higher levels of Black ethnic identity as they got older, as did the Asian-American subjects in the study by Kim (1981).

This last study, Kim (1981), is particularly relevant to the present study as it examines ethnic identity formation in a group of language minority (LM) adults. In the studies that treat ethnic identity as static, ethnic language attitudes, proficiency, and use are often identified as key components of the concept of ethnic identity. However, in Kim's study, the only one available involving a linguistic minority group, language is not considered. The literature leads to the question of whether language is a salient features of ethnic identity formation.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the ethnic idenity formation process and to discover the role of language in the ethnic identity development of five LM adults and any changes in that role over time. The study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are some of the features of ethnic identity?
2. Are there discernible patterns or stages of ethnic identity development? If so, how do the features of ethnic identity relate to these stages?
3. What is the role of language in the developmental process?

Respondents

In-dept interviews were conducted with five U.S.-born ethnic and language minority adults. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents from different language, culture, and economic backgrounds, who in addition are or have been interested in issues related to ethnic identity and was willing to share their feelings and experiences. Based on the literature, it was believed that an interest in ethnic identity issues signaled an advanced stage of ethnic identity development. It was also believed that having reflected upon their own identity, these respondents were more likely to be able to articulate their feelings and be willing to talk about the personal and sensitive issues related to ethnic identity.

Each respondent was interviewed individually in one or two meetings in the location of their choice, either at my home (Lara), in their home (Ray, Keith-first interview), at the university (Chris), or on the telephone (Maria, Keith-second interview). The total interview

time with each respondent ranged from one and a half hours to three and a half hours. Below are brief sketches of each respondent.

Lara is 25 and the daughter of Filipino immigrants. She was born and raised in small migrant farming communities in California near the fields where her father worked for over 50 years. Lara now works as a bilingual teacher in Southern California. She was interviewed once for three hours.

Ray is a 31 year-old engineer who lived most of his life in Northern Virginia, moving to Southern California several years before the time of this study. He is of Chinese descent and explained that his grandparents and great-grandparents immigrated from China to the U.S. and Canada in the early part of this century. Ray was interviewed in one meeting for three hours.

Chris is 36, a graduate student, and a native resident of Southern California. He is of Japanese ancestry and is the fourth generation (on the paternal side) and third generation (on the maternal side) born in the U.S. He was interviewed in two meetings for a total of three hours.

Maria, 25, was raised in Arizona and works as a political analyst in Washington, D.C. Her mother and paternal grandfather immigrated from Mexico to the Southwest region of the U.S. Maria was interviewed on the telephone for one hour. Shortly after the initial interview, she moved to Japan for work-related reasons. Follow-up questions were mailed to Maria and she responded on audiotape. The tape recording was approximately one half hour long.

Keith is 25 and a fourth generation male of Chinese descent. He was raised and continues to live in Arizona. He is a college graduate and works for an electronics company. Keith was interviewed initially for one and a half hours and a second interview lasted one hour.

Methodology

The interviews in this study were tape-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. An interview guide was used in the initial or one-time interviews. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions and notes coded. Each set of interviews were reviewed at least three times. In the first review, open coding was used during which a majority of the sub-categories emerged. A list of the sub-categories was made to aid in identifying general categories of data. After forming a tentative set of the general categories, the transcripts and notes were re-read and re-coded. A third reading helped to confirm the general categories and to refine the sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The categories that emerged were 1) orientations toward culture, 2) orientations toward language, and 3) group membership.

After the three main categories listed above had been identified, a time-ordered matrix was used to organize the data sequentially according to those categories and sub-categories. Data were then further coded where possible, to reflect positive, negative, or neutral feelings, perceptions, and behaviors toward culture, language, and group membership. These data display matrixes were then used to make comparisons across cases and for the identification of trends. A composite display representing the experiences of all the

respondents was created and delineated along the lines of the two stages that emerged. The results of the analyses are discussed in the following sections.

Ethnic Identity Features

The first step of data analysis was to identifying features of ethnic identity in the data in order to use them as indicators of change over time. Three main categories of information emerged from the data. The first category, Orientations Toward Culture, is defined as feelings, perceptions, beliefs, knowledge and behaviors associated with the dominant, ethnic, and hyphenated cultures. (Hyphenated culture, in this study, refers to ethnic American cultures such as Chinese-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Filipino-Americans). Similarly, Orientations Toward Language is defined as feelings, perceptions, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors related to the dominant and ethnic languages. The third category is Group Membership which refers to a sense of belonging to a group with defined boundaries, a willingness to be treated and to have behavior judge within the context of that group, and a sharing with its members of perspectives of the world and ways of behaving. Examples from these categories will be given below to illustrate their role in the stages of ethnic identity development. For the sake of clarity and cohesion, data will be presented under the stages that were identified rather than under these separate categories.

Stages of Ethnic Identity Development

The data displays revealed two stages of development. Since the respondents were asked to recall their feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and knowledge about culture, language,

group membership, and behavior throughout their lives, it was not surprising to find that earlier life experiences were not recalled with the clarity and precision as later ones. As a result, the information gathered in stage 1--a stage spanning early childhood to at least the first years of college--was not as complete and detailed as that of stage 2.

Stage 1

In the first stage, the respondents noted a lack of awareness and/or interest in ethnic language, culture, or group membership and most did not actively seek participation in activities or organizations associated with the ethnic group. As Maria pointed out, she was immersed in the Mexican culture, but was not conscious of it.

> Being raised in a household where you speak Spanish and you have Mexican cultural values everyday, I never thought about it, I never had to think about my culture because I was surrounded by my culture. I was surrounded by Spanish things that were influenced by the Spaniards or Mexicans, so I just took things for granted.

Just as Maria never thought about being of Mexican descent during childhood, Keith said that he felt unquestioningly American and had little awareness of being Chinese. "It wasn't something I thought about really. It never seemed like an issue...All my life, we just did American things." Chris, too, appeared to have similar feelings.

> (I was) never brought up to think that I was Japanese. My parents, I think they just wanted me to know where we came from. Basically we were brought up American.

Lara experienced this period of unawareness as well. However, when she reached high school and became aware of her ethnic minority status, she described feeling uninterested in her Filipino heritage. She explained that this was a period where she viewed herself as American and distanced herself from identification with being Filipino. For example, she did not want to associate with other Filipinos in high school, especially recent arrivals, preferring to be with her English-speaking peers. She did not feel like a member of the ethnic group.

> I wouldn't take part...you know they had the academic advancement program for minority students. I didn't take part in that because I thought, "why?"...I didn't know about the issues of discrimination. I didn't know that taking advantage of these things was good, but at the time I was just like, "No, I'm not going to have a crutch."

For all of the respondents, this was a period in which they had little awareness of or interest in seeking associations with their ethnic heritage, including the ethnic language. Chris' parents enrolled him in the community Japanese language school for about two years but he recalled no interest in learning the language. He was eventually withdrawn from the school and his parents made no other attempts to teach him Japanese. Keith recalled a similar lack of interest when his grandmother visited and tried to teach Keith and his brother a few words of the language. Keith believes that his resistance may have been influenced by his parents' own reluctance to speak the language, describing them as "very much assimilationists."

Ray explained that his parents consciously isolated themselves from the Chinese community in the area.

> They purposely chose to live in Vienna [a city in Northern Virginia] where there weren't any Chinese. I asked my mom why we ended up in Virginia, when all these Chinese were in Maryland. She said, "You have to grow up in the White world. You've got to learn and grow up here because this is who you'll be interacting with."

This isolation from other Chinese, together with his parents' own lack of Chinese proficiency, resulted in little exposure to the language, and interest in learning it was never an issue for Ray. The negative or at least ambivalent feelings Keith and Ray felt about the ethnic language may have been influenced by their parents' own views. However, the other three respondents, Maria, Lara,and Chris mentioned no negative feelings toward the ethnic language on the part of their parents but also appeared to have felt uninterested in being exposed to it or in learning it.

Stage 2

In contrast to Stage 1 in which the respondents appeared to have little interest or even negative attitudes toward their ethnic heritage, Stage 2 appeared to be a period of ethnic identity exploration and experimentation. The respondents described entering this stage when they experienced what may be called "dissonance," a sense of conflict between previously unquestioned or accepted identification and new or renewed racial or ethnically related experiences. This stage is characterized by conflict and confusion. The dissonance the

respondents felt caused feelings of isolation and alienation that are likely to have acted as the impetus for the exploration and identity search that occurs during this stage. The clearest example of these feelings of conflict and uncertainty can be found in the conversation with Ray. On his trip to China, his ethnic identity was questioned a number of times by several who told him he wasn't Chinese because he did not speak the language.

Int.: So, how would you feel when they'd say that?

Ray: Um, I tried to explain to them why but it'd be like...Basically they're categorizing you and saying, "you don't fit in here, where are you from? You're an outsider." Well, not only was I an outsider in this group of people from Hong Kong, I mean in mainland China, with all of these people...whenever I'd go up to talk to them, obviously I don't fit in. I don't know where I fit in...The more I experienced things in China the more I figured out that I'm not Chinese, I'm Chinese-American. And, I'm not even in-between. I'm more American than I am Chinese...I don't know, it makes you think about something. It makes you question, "who are you?" Well, I am who I am but you can't categorize me that easily as being Chinese or American, I'm somewhere in between. You still don't fit in, even though mostly inside culturally you may be American you're still not going to fit in entirely because you look different.

Ray attempted to resolve his feelings of alienation by discovering more about his Chinese heritage and how both American and Chinese influences affected his identity.

All of the respondents experienced dissonance as they came into increased and prolonged contact with other ethnic minorities and/or when they were made aware of their own ethnic minority status. Lara and Keith both mentioned becoming interested in exploring their ethnic identities when they came in contact with other ethnic minorities in college. Lara noted:

> I think when I was a sophomore, it seemed like my other friends were learning about their own culture and I was dating a guy at the time who was Jewish. I think that was interesting. And he knew a lot about his culture. And my friend who was Mexican knew a lot about her culture too. And it made me feel sort of like I needed to know a little bit. And then I took the classes (on Filipino culture), and even then, I feel not austricized but I just couldn't feel comfortable with the Filipinos, even in the classes, which was really weird. But I took the classes and they really changed my view of being Filipino and being American and being hyphenated. I learned a lot. It got me past saying no to my culture, and saying that I'm not Filipino. It got me to a point you know that I am Filipino, very much Filipino.

Keith also experienced this in college.

> I didn't even think about being different other than being called names. I didn't consider myself as being different until college. It was the college atmosphere where everyone talked about minorities, separating everybody, and that's when I became more aware of what my background was and I was actually different than other people and that I was being treated differently.

This exposure prompted him to find out more about Chinese-American history and to examine how his ethnic heritage influenced his upbringing.

For Ray, it was moving from the fairly ethnically homogeneous (White) environment of Northern Virginia to Los Angeles that put him in greater contact with other ethnic minorities. Ray recalled conflicts with his new Taiwanese girlfriend and the girlfriend's family that triggered his initial interest in exploring his ethnic background. Ray recalled that his girlfriend's parents disliked him because of his inability to speak Chinese and his girlfriend's sister questioned his "Chineseness" for the same reason. "It really bothered me, I do remember distinctly, my ex-girlfriend's sister saying, 'you don't speak any Chinese at all?'" Ray said that this and other incidents that focused attention on his Chinese identity caused him to question who he was ethnically and spurred him to try to learn Chinese and to visit China.

In Stage 2, the respondents described a strong interest in exploring the ethnic or hyphenated culture. Ray, for example, traveled to China to visit his grandfather's village with the hope of "finding his roots." Lara, who had avoided contact with other Filipinos in high school joined Filipino-American organizations in college, took courses in the history and politics of Chicano and Filipinos-Americans. Keith became active in the Asian-American association at the university and Maria became an advocate of minority hiring at her work. "I'm more proud of (my heritage) than I've ever been. I'm more activist about trying to improve minority hiring at work. I'm involved in the Hispanic Heritage Committee at work. I'm trying to bridge at work, to try to get more Hispanic employees at my place of work."

As a new emphasis is placed on examining the ethnic and hyphenated cultures in Stage 2, three of the respondents recalled feeling ambivalent or even negative about the dominant culture and language and moving away from American identification. Lara described a period of anger toward dominant society after reading about the discriminatory experiences of a Filipino writer. "I started becoming more anti-White, and anti-American society. It got to a point where I would say I was Filipino, you know, more so Filipino than American." Keith also described a brief period where he was finding out about Chinese-American contributions and accomplishment during which he felt less favorable toward American culture and resentful of the history of ill-treatment afforded minority Americans. Ray also questioned previously accepted American cultural practices after his trip to China. "I learned a lot of stuff and there are some good things and bad things about Americans. They're very self-centered, they don't always think of the group as a whole."

Stage 2 was also a period of interest in the ethnic language both as a means to gain entre into the ethnic culture and to strengthen ethnic identification. When Ray began examining his ethnicity, he enrolled in a Chinese course due to what he described as a sense that as a Chinese-American "I should know some Chinese."

Int.: Why did you start taking Chinese?

Ray: I wanted to learn Chinese. I thought it wouldn't be bad to learn Chinese which was the country where my grandparents came from.

Int.: Was this a recent interest?

Ray: Yes, I guess so. I never even considered learning Chinese back in Virginia.

A few months later, Ray decided to travel to China and took several other courses in preparation. Keith also enrolled in a Chinese course in college, feeling the same way as Ray that he should be familiar with the language and that it was the "right thing to do to learn more about my culture and heritage." Chris also took a Japanese language course but did so for more practical reasons. He was considering a degree in linguistics and thought proficiency in another language would be helpful and Japanese seemed to obvious choice. Lara, too, developed an interest in improving her proficiency in Tagalog. She felt that her Filipino identity was incomplete without knowledge of Tagalog.

Lara: Maybe it's because I just didn't feel that I had had enough. Maybe not having the language was really hard because I feel like I've lost something.

Int.: Not having the language?

Lara: Yeah. Definitely not having the language. I go up to Filipinos and I know what they're saying but I want to say something back to them. It's really hard. Especially with older people, because my father was so much older. I know they speak English but it's still much more (meaningful in Tagalog).

Int.: Have you thought about learning it?

Lara: Oh yeah, all the time. It's just that I don't have any time. I wanted to in college but they didn't offer it. They do now. I do, all the time.

Unlike the other respondents, Maria moved from a culturally diverse community to a more ethnically homogeneous one. Maria never considered learning Spanish to be an issue

while growing up, but in a new community with so few Latinos, developed a great interest in improving her Spanish proficiency.

> I felt very alienated from my culture. After I realized that, it took a couple of years to figure out that something was bothering me. And once I realized that it was because I no longer spoke Spanish, that I couldn't hear Spanish. I became more aware of that.

Maria explained that she regretted not keeping up her Spanish after high school and is looking for opportunities now to develop it.

Discussion

The results of this study suggests that there are at least two stages of ethnic identity development experienced by the respondents. Further, the respondents' orientations toward the ethnic language appeared to parallel the changes that occurred in their orientations toward the ethnic culture and group membership. That is, as more positive attitudes and interest developed in the ethnic heritage, more interest developed in learning the ethnic language. The respondents described moving from a stage in which they had little interest or had negative feelings toward ethnic identification and the ethnic language, into a period of conflict and confusion and of exploration and experimentation. The results seem to support Erickson's (1968) assertion that identity is formed as a result of a definable process. The results also seem to support the models review earlier in that these two stages move from an unexamined identity and a period of unawareness or ambivalence into a period of introspection, experimentation, and exploration. No evidence was found for the final stage

of conflict resolution and identity achievement. This is not surprising considering the age of the informants the fact that all of the respondents appear to be in the second stage of this multi-stage process.

The results of this study also suggest that language plays a prominent role in identity formation. In Stage 1, consistent with their overall feelings toward their ethnic background, the respondents were either ambivalent or uninterested in knowing about and learning the ethnic language. In Stage 2, as they discovered more about their ethnic culture, the respondents, without exception, developed an interest in learning the language. The more precise role of language in the development process is difficult to define in this limited examination but this study suggests that this role may be quite an important one and warrants further study.

Limitations of the Study

Two main limitations of the study should be noted when interpreting the results. For this preliminary examination, limited methodologies were used. For example, multiple types of respondents is often used in qualitative studies to strengthened the reliability and validity of the results, and had it been possible, interviews with parents, siblings, close friends regarding changes that they observed in the respondents over time would have allowed for some triangulation. However, because the primary aim of the the study was to gain insight into respondents' feelings toward their own identity development, these additional sources may perhaps not have been helpful in this respect.

A second limitation relates to the nature of retrospective data. As with other forms of self- and retrospective reporting, detail and/or thoroughness of the accounts may diminish with time, and the accounts may also have been "screened" through subsequent reflections, however unconscious or unintentional. Despite these shortcomings, however, this study has provided a modest beginning in exploring ethnic identity and the role of language.

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